

## All Things to All People

Schisms, Failures  
Of SEATO Traced  
Back to Its OriginBy John Sterling  
London Observer

BANGKOK—Helmeted, pistol-carrying Thai guards watch a visitor's every move in cleverly angled wall mirrors at the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization headquarters in Bangkok. No stranger can move a step beyond the lobby without an official escort. Inside the offices, printed notices warn officials to lock their filing cabinets after work.

But this stern facade of security is mocked by the distrust which rankles in the heart of the organization. The eight member states—Australia, France, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, Britain and the United States—are sharply divided about the basic aims of SEATO.

Sometimes the squabbles break into the open, as before the recent ministerial council meeting in Canberra. Thailand's Foreign Minister, Thanat Khoman, alleged that SEATO's failure to act during the Laotian crisis of 1961 was directly responsible for the situation in South Vietnam.

## Warning Sounded

The Philippines delegate gave warning that his country intended to tell France either to work fully with SEATO or to get out. Britain's Foreign Secretary feared, with good reason, that the Americans and Australians would question British defense plans for Southeast Asia.

Somehow the disharmony was smoothed over and SEATO staggered through another crisis meeting.

The structural flaws in SEATO were there from the moment of its birth in Manila in September, 1954. The treaty (also called the Manila Pact) was preceded and overshadowed by the conference of nine nations in Geneva which formally ended the Indochina war in July of that year. The Geneva accords were a compromise, forced upon the West by the disastrous defeat of the French at Dienbienphu.

## News Analysis

But even as the Western diplomats beat a retreat at Geneva, Western military experts planned to face the Communists with a new military pact.

Late in June these experts from the ANZUS Pact (Australia, New Zealand and the United States) decided to set up a study group in Washington to draft the Manila Pact. John Foster Dulles was the most energetic advocate of the SEATO idea. He explained that as he saw it its purpose was "to save all of Southeast Asia if it can be saved, and if not, to save the essential parts of it."

He was seconded by Richard Casey of Australia. Then, as today, the Australians believed the safety of their own country depended on the collective defense of the western Pacific backed by American military power.

## Already Accepted

For Britain, Winston Churchill had already accepted the concept of an Asian pact against communism. But at Geneva, Anthony Eden committed Britain to a more delicate course. To reach the much-desired settlement with the Communists, he and Pierre Mendes-France gave Chou En-lai an unwritten assurance that South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia would be neutralized, and in particular would accept no American bases.

So France and Britain entered SEATO with important reservation. To keep their Geneva commitments

they had to demilitarize the Indochina states. America, on the other hand, supported by Australia, New Zealand and the Philippines, wanted SEATO to be a military guarantee for the frontiers drawn at Geneva between Communist and non-Communist Asia.

But since all the parties were anxious to get SEATO in being, a compromise was hastily reached. Laos, Cambodia and South Vietnam (the three states most vulnerable to Communist attack) were tucked away into a protocol which offered them protection without stating definitely that it would be provided.

Through the paper patch work of the communique, after the recent Canberra meeting, SEATO's deep schism can still be seen. Yet 1966 should have been its year of vindication. In February, Dean Rusk declared that the huge American force in South Vietnam was there because of his Government's commitment under SEATO. However, Britain, France and Pakistan indicated that while this might be America's interpretation of SEATO's fine print, it was not theirs.

Lawyers would take many months to determine whether SEATO members are committed to defend South Vietnam, which is not itself a member, but merely one of three "designated territories" which may, in vaguely specified circumstances, become eligible for collective military protection by SEATO. The two other "designated territories," Cambodia and Laos, have officially rejected SEATO protection.

## Weakness Revealed

To avoid legal and political haggles, South Vietnam has not even applied to SEATO for aid. Memories are still vivid of the confusion which fell upon the organization when Prince Boun Oum of Laos asked SEATO to send observers to his country during an invasion scare in January, 1961.

The Laos crisis showed the fundamental weakness of SEATO; a weakness which has since led its members (and one "designated territory") to re-interpret the Treaty in terms of bilateral alliances. The Thanat-Rusk agreement of 1962 declared that the U.S. obligation to help Thailand

in the event of Communist armed attack does not require the prior agreement of all other parties to the treaty, since "the obligation is individual as well as collective."

In the same way, South Vietnam's military arrangements with the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand and the Philippines have bypassed the Secretary-General of SEATO.

The last SEATO ministerial meeting merely "observed with satisfaction" the forms of assistance given by its members to South Vietnam and noted that they were "consistent with" their Treaty obligation. But the organization has played no significant part in negotiating the military aid to South Vietnam.

Ambiguity remains the prime cause of SEATO's infirmity of purpose. As long as there remains the pretense that the Geneva accords are still valid, SEATO must function without a clearly defined role.